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Errant Soviet missile story debunked

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Senior Reagan administration sources characterized as "rubbish" yesterday published reports in Europe that an errant Soviet missile was heading for Hamburg, West Germany, when it crashed in Finland earlier this month.

White House press spokesman Larry Speakes said there was no hotline communication between the United States and the Soviet Union when the sea-launched missile passed over Norwegian territory before crashing in a remote area of Finland.

"There was no phone call to the U.S. from the Soviet Union about stopping the thing while it was flying around," Mr. Speakes said.

Information received from British and NATO sources indicates that reports saying the Soviets had shot down their own missile to keep it from reaching the Hamburg area were "rubbish."

And Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger mistakenly said yesterday that Soviet forces recently shot down an errant Soviet cruise missile "on its way at least into Finland."

The Pentagon's top spokesman said Weinberger "goofed" in making the statement before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Michael Burch said the Soviet missile crashed and was not shot down.

"We know that it was not shot down," Mr. Burch said. "It apparently crashed. It either flew into the ground or it ran out of fuel."

In London, British defense experts ridiculed yesterday a report in the Daily Express claiming the missile's direction was the result of a war plan being filed into its computer by mistake, that the "hot-line" between Moscow and Washington had been activated, and that military officials in both capitals had decided to keep the error secret to avoid damaging the forthcoming arms control talks in Geneva.

One defense expert proceeded to rip apart the article's claims point by point. Both he and another expert said they knew of no change in the intelligence assessment that the rogue missile was an SS-N-3 "Shaddock" model, which has a range of only 250 miles. Hamburg and Bremen were an estimated 2,125 miles from the launch site.

The Ministry of Defense dismissed the report and declined to comment.

The Express story had claimed the missile was, in fact, the newer SS-N-12 "Sandbox" model, which has a range of "more than 2,000 miles," but the experts said the "Sandbox" is an anti-ship missile with a maximum range of about 312 miles. The only 2,000-mile range Soviet cruise missile, one expert said, is the SS-NX-21 which is still experimental and has not yet been deployed.

"I see no reason why the Soviets should want to attack Hamburg from Northern Norway with a Shaddock or a Sandbox," he said. "They fly at the speed of an airliner, and would take forever to reach their target. The Soviets are much better off with their six Golf 2 ballistic missile subs in the Baltic."

The missile was believed to be a practice shot from a Soviet submarine in Arctic waters. It was believed to have gone astray over a narrow strip of Norway and Finland. The Soviets quickly apologized at the time of the incident, explaining that the missile's guidance system malfunctioned.

Peter Almond in London contributed to this article.